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AUTHOR Tomlin, Michael E.; Kolton, William
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ABSTRACT

The University of Wyoming's College of Education and select public school districts have joined in partnership in establishing a collaborative teacher education program. The districts apply for "Center for Excellence in Teaching" recognition from the university based upon established criteria. The approved school districts provide a field-based instructional and student teacher semester within which their staff teaches staff development programs as university curricula to the teacher candidates. This relationship is felt to empower the public schools by having them develop and teach some of the teacher education curricula. The college's recognition of the need to develop a collaborative relationship with the public schools stemmed from the realization that college faculty were not able to keep up with the school districts in staff development, resulting in poorly prepared student teaching candidates. The school district's rationale for entering into the collaborative program was the opportunity to custom design the content of the field-based curriculum for teacher candidates they would be hiring in the future. The university and its teacher education faculty, the public school districts and their staff, and the teacher candidates have all reported significant benefits. (Contains 11 references.) (JDD)

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Collaborative Teacher Education: University Academic Divestiture Equals Public School Empowerment

by

Michael E. Tomlin and William Kolton

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to describe one state university's solution to establishing a collaborative relationship with the public school districts by divesting and empowering those schools to develop and teach some of the academic curricula in the baccalaureate teacher education degree program. This approach may hold potential for other universities and school districts to enter into "cooperatives" in teacher education.

Background

The University of Wyoming's Centers for Excellence in Teaching (WYCET) approach to an extended field-based "student teaching" experience is the result of the intersection of a triad of research. Our College of Education is not unique in attempting to reform and improve how we prepare teachers; this is a wave actually started by the host of reform reports of the 1980's. While many of the reports focused on a back-to-the-basics, lengthened school day, and the need for restructuring the public schools, few major reports addressed the need for teachers to teach differently, or even to be better at what they do.1 However, the challenge was there, spurred by many attempts to

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bypass schools and colleges of education through alternative certification means. Other bodies of research were calling for close ties to be developed between the public schools and the universities, allowing and in fact creating a true collaboration between these often separate partners in teaching.2 With the same goal in mind but from a different perspective was the call for public schools to become "laboratories" for future teachers, availed to the universities for field study by their teacher education candidates.3 While, from yet another direction, researchers in teacher education were trying to defeat the chronicled isolation of the teaching act through innovative and cooperative teacher education,4 some called for student teachers to be placed in diads in the public schools to insure at least one colleague was available for relevant discussion,5 while others were attempting to defeat the isolationist nature of the schools through the use of regular teleconference linkup of field-based student teachers, thus assuring some of the benefits of a group learning environment.6

The intersection of these bodies of research became the founding principles of the WYCET program, and resulted in a unique and successful university and public school collaborative program of teacher education.

The Need for Collaboration

A bipartite need for collaboration has almost always existed

in the teacher training process. The school or college of education needs the schools for student teaching and practicum placements, and the public schools need the student teachers for in-district renewal, and to see and drive the new year's model of teachers for possible future employment. What is traditionally missed, however, are the real needs for true collaboration; those which go far beyond the ones previously stated in terms of enhancing all that we do in the name of educational improvement.

University Need for Collaboration

The University of Wyoming's College of Education, like many similar institutions traditionally "collaborated" with the public schools as a one-way recipient of services; namely student teaching and practicum placements, and cooperating/supervising teachers. This traditional model of "collaboration" earned the college an "Ivory Tower" image in the public schools. As a student teaching supervisor, I was well aware of this image as I carried out my duties in and out of the schools. While the solution to this seemed quite simply to be a true collaborative relationship, it was not until the college began to revamp its undergraduate teacher education program, and the aforementioned triad of research surfaced, that we truly saw the potential for such a relationship.

The college's need to develop a collaborative relationship with the public schools stemmed from the realization that our faculty were not able to keep up with the school districts in

terms of staff development. While the public schools were regularly bringing consultants to their districts to provide their professionals with advanced teacher education in such topics as "Cooperative Learning," "Instructional Theory into Practice," and "Teacher expectations and Student Achievement," the university had neither the funds nor faculty release time to similarly upgrade their knowledge and skills.7 The result of this was that our student teacher candidates were being sent to the schools for their field experience much less well prepared than what the public school community expected. Given that monies and time were not forthcoming, the solution was a "cooperative" with the schools, which ultimately became WYCET, as explained later in this paper.

Other university needs for collaboration that came to light during our program review included the benefits of a true laboratory available to us in the schools, free of charge. While this seems rather simplistic there also seems to be a significant amount of literature suggesting that universities form laboratory partnerships with schools, seeming to suggest that this is not regularly done.8 It is simple and yet blatantly clear that only the schools have those critical components of a university teacher education program - children, teachers, and classrooms.

We quite unashamedly arrived at the realization that the university also had political reasons to develop strong collaborative relationships with the schools. It was determined

that recognizing schools as "Centers of Teaching Excellence" was also to the university's benefit. As was the empowering of teachers with university academic curricula, per the WYCET program.

School District Need for Collaboration

Public school districts have for years been on the giving end of the one-way relationship previously discussed. Not only is this relationship changing, but Wyoming schools are discovering new benefits from the old relationship. Separated sometimes by distance and usually by philosophy, the university is often viewed by the public school staffs as purveyors of summer offerings, and housing education professors (and others) who are out of contact with teachers, classrooms, and reality. What then can there be for public school districts in a collaborative relationship, and why should the schools seek one? Quite simply because, they stand to gain a great deal by becoming a partner in teacher education. On the large scale, one does not have to read widely to come across literature calling for "teacher empowerment," and few things are more empowering than ownership. The University of Wyoming's public schools grants limited ownership to the schools in teacher training. This is a role not traditionally seen in teacher education, one by which school administrators have reported seeing a professional maturation of their teaching and administrative staffs. School districts that have been selected to participate in the

collaborative teacher education program have the opportunity to custom design the content of the field-based curriculum, thus inculcating future teachers with an experience that reflects the strengths of that school district, its comprehensive staff development program, and the current and most relevant research of the day - emanating directly from the classroom.

School district personnel officers report another major reason for entering into this type of partnership with the university, which stems from the level of teaching sophistication gained by the WYCET graduates. This sophistication results from participation in the district staff development programs, and enables the districts to hire first year teachers of whom they have had a significant impact in their preparation. This benefit came directly from the obvious need, and one that often creates the chasm between school districts and teacher training institutions, in that it is often heard that schools could do a "better job" of preparing teachers. This collaborative program allows and encourages that type of function by the public schools, thus assuring that their future teachers are prepared to be immediately successful in the district, and not destined for the traditional trial by fire first year.

The "Centers for Excellence" Approach

The University of Wyoming's Centers for Excellence in Teaching (WYCET) approach to teacher education has evolved from a

one-district pilot project and study to its flagship and now standard culminating field experience for teacher education candidates. WYCET is a semester long field-based teacher education experience collaboratively taught by university and public school education professionals. The uniqueness of the program focuses on the peer supportive assignments of student teachers to "Centers," the selection and designation of particular school districts as "Centers," the instructional roles assumed by school district faculty and staff, and research basis for the structure.

The Selection of School Districts as "Centers"

The selection of school districts as WYCET Centers has clearly evolved since the pilot project in 1986. For the pilot one district was recruited and established the collaborative standard with the university that has continued to the present. This district (Green River, WY) was selected based upon its recognition by the National Staff Development Council as having an exemplary staff development program. Based upon the success of the pilot, five additional districts were recruited the following year for continued study. The WYCET Program and its graduates met with such success and with such enthusiasm statewide that districts now apply for acceptance into the collaborative Program, with 24 school districts presently designated as Centers for Excellence in Teaching. The following criteria have been established for districts to be accepted into

the WYCET Program.

1. The school district must have a clearly defined mission, adopted by its teachers, administrative team, and Board of Trustees.
2. The school district must demonstrate a commitment to excellence in teaching and learning.
3. The school district must have a clearly defined, objective-based staff development program.
4. The district must state its desire to participate in the collaborative teacher education program.

The Structure of the Centers: A Research-based Model

Once a school district has received "Center for Excellence in Teaching" recognition from the university they begin developing the curriculum for their WYCET Program, in collaboration with one of the university's field-based faculty, who will most likely serve as the student teacher supervisor in that district. The Program will be broken into a six-week instructional block, and a ten-week student teaching block. The core of the district's curriculum will be presented during the six-week instructional block. As they develop the curriculum, they must also select presenter teachers and administrators to teach the classes; the curriculum usually tied directly to the district's staff development program. The Program now looks like

this:

Weeks 1-6

- The student teacher spends 1/4 day in their classroom with their cooperating/supervising teacher. They will begin the transition from student to teacher, but may do so at a measured pace.
- The student teacher spends 1/4 day with other teachers and district staff in their school and in other schools in the district. They will ultimately have spent time in every classroom, office, and function in their school, and in many classrooms, offices and functions in numerous other schools throughout the district.
- The student teacher spends 1/2 day receiving formal, practical, and function-based instruction from the school district teaching and administrative staffs.

Weeks 7-16

- The student teacher assumes teaching responsibilities at a normal or gradual rate. They return every two weeks to meet with their in-district "professors" for retooling and reality checks. At this time, the university supervisor begins in-class supervision of the student teachers.

<u>The school district is now serving as a field-based laboratory for teacher education</u>. The student teachers have been

assigned as a group (5-25) depending on the size a particular WYCET district can accommodate. They meet daily for discussion of their learnings during the first six weeks and can as John Goodlad has proposed "live, sleep, and talk the business of becoming a teacher."9 They are in tandem assignments, in that no one is assigned to a school alone. They work in a peer supportive environment knowing that at least two are in the same school, and "boat." This support process greatly helps them to pass through the "phases" of student teaching, and to survive the "rites of passage."10,11 And, the school district is serving much as a teaching hospital might in the medical profession, truly a laboratory in the field, and in collaboration with the university in the preparation of teachers.12

Benefits of Collaboration

Benefits to the University

The university receives many benefits from such a collaborative program as WYCET. First and foremost, we have strengthened our teacher education program, bringing it in line with current research, and capitalizing on the facilities and expertise of our colleagues in the public schools. Secondly, we have been able to better accept an austere budget situation by divesting of some of the curricula that we were not able to add to the "campus" program, and letting it be taught where it probably should be - in the very schools where it is happening.

Additionally, our "stock" has risen in the state simply by being more visible in the schools, among teachers, and treating them as colleagues and partners. We have also received a hidden benefit from the collaboration with public schools, and that is one coming from our own recognition and admittance that they have credibility and expertise that maybe we (the university) do not have. This in itself has gotten our faculty up and running for self improvement.

Benefits to the School Districts

School districts that participate in the collaborative teacher education program with the university gain a strong sense of the recognition of professional efficacy. Given the requirement of districts to meet strict criteria to be included in the collaborative venture, reinforcement of the district's efforts with respect to being on the leading edge of school improvement in the state is acknowledged and reinforced.

An aspect that is often overlooked, but which has been found to be an essential component of the district's collaborative efforts with the university is the recognition that results are gained through the district's staff development program. As school districts begin to gain a voice in the teacher preparation experience and process, they must also examine their philosophies, policies, and staff development programs. Highly organized programs built on a strong theoretical base that clearly indicates the relationship between theories, standards of

performance, and the role of the teacher as a decision maker will prove to be those which provide the novice teacher with skills with which to be successful, to the benefit of the hiring school district.

The collaboration experience also provides the opportunity for district personnel to feel a sense of accomplishment as a result of their efforts. These efforts of mentoring, and serving as adjunct university instructors increases the professional competency of the district staff. Additionally, the district is empowered with selecting and composing university curricula for the six-week instructional block. This sense of recognition provides a validation of the professional expertise of the public school district, staff, and process.

Collaboration in the WYCET Program also offers the district and the professional teacher an opportunity to "give back," and in fact more than they probably received. But they are not just givers, as their long term, structured, collaborative participation in the Program keeps them in contact with senior candidates of teacher education, fresh from the university and all that it has to offer. This contact allows the veteran staff member to explore new trends and ideas that the candidate may have brought from the "Ivory Tower." This interaction often fosters a continual dialogue between the professional and the candidate, serving as a source of renewal for the veteran teacher.

Benefits to the Student Teachers

Our graduates tell us regularly that five specific benefits result from this collaborative program; benefits not noted in our previous one-way student teacher program. One of the most pleasing is that it is regularly noted that a "good relationship" seems to exist between the College of Education and the 24 participating school districts. We believe this benefits the students, to feel that they are in a welcome and comfortable position in their student teaching assignment. The graduates also note that WYCET served as an effective bridge between university theory and public school reality. The fact of having school district personnel teach field-based theory classes gained a new awareness in the candidates. It has also been reported that the six-week lead-in time with varied duties mixed with regular coursework, albeit taught by school teachers, really helped the candidates make the transition from a student to a teacher during their field experience. A fourth major benefit to the student teacher was the phenomena of seeing their supervising teacher grow professionally during the semester-long program. Given the nature of the 16 week structure, and the district staff's unique role as teacher trainers it was exciting to note the student teachers reporting of specific growth in their mentor teachers. We believer this also reinforces in the novice teacher the need for continued growth throughout their profession. Finally, the students reported they had felt fortunate to be able

to benefit from the best of both worlds - learning from university professors that which can be best taught on the main campus, and from public school professionals that which can be best taught from and in the field. Yet another, and special benefit the candidates have derived is "hireability." As the WYCET Program has established itself as being significantly successful, school district personnel officers are contacting the university and asking for graduates specifically from that program. They seem to be convinced that the participating districts's impact on the teacher candidate increases their readiness for the classroom.

How to Establish a Collaborative Teacher Education Program

Throughout the process of establishing our collaborative program for teacher education, we have determined what we believe to be the "essential elements" for the development of such a program. These elements are not separable for universities or school districts, for the same criteria holds true for both. First, both institutions must assure readiness. The professional maturity of the university faculty to intrust curricula to the schools, and the professional maturity of the district to accept empowerment are the single most important factors in developing a true collaborative relationship of this nature. The setting aside of any jealousies or "turf" problems is mission-essential. Secondly, both institutions must accept

and believe in the body of literature calling for the establishment of teacher training "centers," and the need for teacher empowerment in the preparation of future teachers. Without this philosophical agreement, no foundation for the collaboration would exist. Either institution must then initiate the contact to begin discussion of developing a collaborative program. The school district should be prepared to offer its mission, commitment, staff development program, and professional staff as evidence of readiness to assume a partnership in teacher education. The university must be ready and willing to divest of selected curricula and take advantage of the field-based laboratory for teacher training, while providing regular faculty contact with the district's program team.

Summary

The University of Wyoming's College of Education and select public school districts have joined in partnership in establishing a collaborative teacher education program. The districts apply for "Center for Excellence in Teaching" recognition from the university based upon established criteria. The approved school districts provide a field-based instructional and student teaching semester within which their staff teachers staff development programs as university curricula to the teacher candidates. The assignment of the student teacher and the structure of the laboratory-like experience is based on current

literature espousing the creation of "teacher training school districts." The university and its teacher education faculty, the public school districts and their staff, and the teacher candidates have all reported significant benefits stemming from the collaborative program.

The State of Wyoming's WYCET Program is an example of the kind of collaborative relationship that can be established between autonomous institutions or agencies who share a similar mission.

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